

DEALING WITH LOSS

GUARDIAN ANGELS SURPRISE TEEN

Carson: Detective, deputies travel to Wilmington girl's new home for quinceanera

Bonding: Trio vowed not to forget her after her mother was slain in botched robbery



PHOTOS BY ANGELA MAJOR — BATON ROUGE ADVOCATE

Katty Gomez gets a hug from Senior Deputy Nancy Bowley on Saturday during her quinceanera at her family's Baton Rouge, La., home. Bowley is one of three L.A. County sheriff's officials who have kept in touch with Gomez since her mother's slaying in 2006.

By Larry Altman
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Sheriff's Detective Jorge Padilla recently bought an iPhone 5s for Katty Gomez and put the 15-year-old on his family plan.

Although the former Wilmington girl isn't his blood relative — and now lives in Louisiana — Padilla considers himself a “dad” to Katty.

“I think my two partners became like mom to her,” Padilla said Thursday. “She is doing great. Her grades are excellent.”

Padilla, along with Deputies Blanca Arevalo and Nancy Bowley, traveled to Baton Rouge, La., last week to surprise Katty as she celebrated her quinceanera, a Latin American tradition that marks a girl's transition on her 15th birthday from childhood to womanhood.

“We were hiding behind a wall,” Padilla said. “She was very surprised. We just walk out to her and we hug, and

she cries, and there's tears everywhere.”

The deputies forged a bond with Katty eight years ago, when they responded to one of Carson's worst crime scenes. Three men killed Katty's mother, 32-year-old Esther Arteaga, and 74-year-old Eduardo Roco on Nov. 6, 2006, in a botched holdup at the Mobil Mart at 223rd Street and Avalon Boulevard.

It was Roco's last night before retirement. The retired Navy captain and husband was training Arteaga, who was on her first night at work to replace him.

Arevalo notified Arteaga's family. Katty answered the door and Arevalo immediately knew she was Arteaga's daughter. Padilla, the deputy in charge at the crime scene, watched as Katty's family gathered behind the yellow tape.

“I started feeling really bad for them,” he said.

The next day, Padilla, Arevalo and Bowley drove past the crime scene.

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Katty Gomez receives a new laptop on Saturday, thanks to the three L.A. County sheriff's officials who flew to Louisiana to surprise her for her quinceanera.

“I’m just really happy. They’re like guardian angels that my mom sent me, and I’m just really happy that I have them in my life. I wouldn’t be the person I am if it weren’t for them.”

— Katty Gomez, a former Wilmington resident

Birthday

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“It was a somber feeling,” Padilla recalled. “It was a weird feeling.”

Though they couldn't bring Katty's mother back, the deputies decided they would give her the best Christmas they could. They enlisted the public to help, and received gifts and donations that filled the Carson sheriff's station hallways and evidence room. One anonymous attorney offered to pay for Katty's education. She began attending school at Sts. Peter & Paul School in Wilmington, living nearby with her grandmother.

The deputies' relationship with Katty did not stop there. They made a pact to not forget her.

“We were still working in the area,” Padilla said. “We would drive over there and make sure she was OK. Nancy and Blanca took her on her birthday to Disneyland a few times.”

Padilla kept in touch with her, checking how she was doing and dealing with her loss.

Three years ago, Katty's

grandmother decided to leave Southern California and move near relatives in Baton Rouge to start fresh and away from the painful memories. The deputies, now scattered in different assignments, maintained contact with her.

The invitations to Katty's quinceanera arrived a few weeks ago. The deputies requested time off to go. Assistant Sheriff Todd Rogers, who was captain at the Carson sheriff's station when the murders occurred, told them the department would handle the expenses.

Padilla notified Baton Rouge police, but didn't tell Katty they were coming.

Last Saturday, a swarm of police officers and media suddenly showed up at Katty's apartment as she readied herself for her quinceanera. Tears welled in Katty's eyes when she saw the deputies approach.

“I'm just, really happy,” Katty later told the Baton Rouge Advocate. “They're like guardian angels that my mom sent me, and I'm just really happy that I have them in my life. I wouldn't be the person I am if it weren't for them.”

The deputies presented her with an array of gifts. Padilla brought her the iPhone 5s; Arevalo and Bowley bought her a Tiffany & Co. bracelet. Together, the deputies bought her a laptop.

“She is part of our family,” Padilla said. “We should be bringing her out here to stay for a couple of weeks.”

Padilla, who now works for the department's detective bureau, said Bowley now serves as a drill instructor at the Sheriff's Department academy in East Los Angeles. Arevalo is a sergeant at the Carson sheriff's station.

“(Katty) named us her guardian angels,” Padilla repeated proudly. “I hope God grants me the time to be able to attend her graduation and hopefully her marriage one day. I will definitely be there.”

The men who killed Katty's mother — Eric Sanford, Julio Perez and Adam Loza — were convicted of first-degree murder and attempted robbery in Compton Superior Court in 2008. Loza was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole. Sanford and Perez were sentenced to 50 years to life behind bars.

Their appeals were denied.

Jim McDonnell for sheriff in L.A. County

The election for sheriff hasn't produced the vigorous campaign that Los Angeles County voters expected and deserve. But the reason isn't all bad.

It was clear before the June primary that one of the seven candidates stood out, combining an impressive resume as a law-enforcement leader, a track record in tackling reforms and an outsider's eye for problems, precisely the qualities needed to turn around the L.A. County Sheriff's Department.

That's Jim McDonnell, who receives the Los Angeles News Group's whole-hearted endorsement for the Nov. 4 election.

McDonnell, the Long Beach police chief, received 49.4 percent of the votes in the primary, just short of the outright majority that would have allowed him to avoid a runoff.

Paul Tanaka, who finished a distant second in June with 15.1 percent, has all but given up. His website's calendar lists "no events yet" — less than three weeks before election day. It's never a good sign for a candidate when he makes the biggest headlines of his campaign by insisting that he is still running, as Tanaka did in September.

County residents see that Tanaka, the tough-talking former undersheriff pushed out by Sheriff Lee Baca, is more a cause of the department's scandals than a potential solution.

It's hard to run for sheriff while the target of a federal corruption investigation. This is underscored by another feature of Tanaka's campaign website: In the "issues" section, "New Direction and Leadership for the Sheriff's Department" is only fourth in his priorities.

Fresh leadership is what the next sheriff's first four-year term must be all about. The results of the last regime led to Baca abruptly retiring in January after 15 years in charge. John Scott has served as interim sheriff since then.

The latest boot to drop in

the Sheriff's Department was the sentencing to as many as 3 ½ years in prison of six former deputies and lieutenants for conspiring to obstruct an FBI investigation of jailhouse-brutality allegations. A seventh has since been convicted.

The judge said the six showed "blind obedience to a corrupt culture." Defense attorneys claimed the deputies followed orders from Baca and Tanaka.

The scandals involving jail brutality and civil-rights abuses by sheriff's personnel have shaken public confidence in the department that polices 42 cities and the county's community colleges, courts and Metro transit lines. Restoring effective leadership to an agency ruled by cliques and personal loyalties will be McDonnell's task. He is cut out for it.

Before becoming Long Beach police chief in 2010, McDonnell was second in command to then-Los Angeles Police Chief Bill Bratton. He was a major force in straightening out the LAPD following the Rampart corruption scandal. He is no stranger to the Sheriff's Department's issues, having served on the Citizens' Commission on Jail Violence; all of the panel's other members have endorsed McDonnell for sheriff.

McDonnell favors two key measures: enhanced accountability for sheriff's personnel, and independent civilian oversight.

It is a shame that the weeks before this election hasn't produced a full debate about the changes the Sheriff's Department needs. But in a sense that debate has been going on for a few years.

The change must start at the top. Jim McDonnell is clearly the better choice for that office.